Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2014
Aesthetics of Theory in the Modern Era and Beyond / Photographie documentaire

Garry Winogrand & friends

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Publisher
AFEA

Electronic version
URL: http://transatlantica.revues.org/7215
ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference
Jean Kempf, « Garry Winogrand & friends », *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2014, Online since 22 February 2015, connection on 01 October 2016. URL : http://transatlantica.revues.org/7215

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Jean Kempf

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is a revised version of a paper presented on November 15, 2014 at the Musée du Jeu-de-Paume.

1 It's a good thing for photography that such a comprehensive and intelligent exhibition of Garry Winogrand's work was organized, and could travel to France.[1] For Winogrand is the least known over here among a tremendously important group of four American photographers who in less than a decade—roughly between 1955 and 1965—changed the course of contemporary photography.[2]

A little family story for a start

2 The first one to make a name for himself was Robert Frank (born in 1924). Frank was Swiss, and came to the US as part of a personal search for work (he would make fashion photos in New York), but most certainly following a tropism in the post-war decades when the US (re)emerged as a promised land for young Europeans, especially artists and photographers.[3] Thanks to a Guggenheim fellowship that he earned with the explicit backing of Walker Evans who took him as his *protegé*, Frank traveled extensively across the US for a year and produced a book—*The Americans*—who made him famous in the photo community at least, partly because of the somewhat hostile reception of his allegedly "bleak" view if the United States, but mostly because his photography established a radical visual style.[4] But as Frank was working on his *Americans*, other young American photographers were also experimenting in the same vein, and Winogrand (born in 1928) was one of them, going down from the Bronx to Manhattan, to quote the first part of the exhibition. As the 1950s drew to a close, another young man arrived from the West coast this time to New York (in a manner of inverted conquest of the continent), Lee

Friedlander (born 1934). In the extremely lively and creative music and magazine scene in NYC, Diane Arbus was at the same period in the process of moving from her role as assistant to a fashion photographer (who was also her husband) to her own photographic work that she was still trying to define.[5]

3 Frank, Winogrand, Arbus, Friedlander, four different people who developed individual styles (although the pictures by Winogrand and Friedlander in the 1960s can be somewhat interchangeable), but who were all characterized by:

4 1) the extreme subjectivity of their use of the camera and yet their deep concern for / interest in their subjects (as opposed to formalists like Edward Weston for instance);

5 2) an acute sense that they were part of a history of photography—a genealogy even—as continuators of an already existing tradition (a tradition partly built by a single institution called the MoMA which began exhibiting photographs in the 1930s) but that they were breaking from it as well;

6 3) their commitment in photography as more than images but as a way of life involving, for better or for worse, their whole beings.[6]

7 The last point is particularly important. For those years were rather lush ones for photographers with a serious attitude and personal aspiration in the "medium". Magazines allowed good photographers to make a rather decent living with both non-press and non-commercial assignments—topics that would soon be called "editorial".[7] They could also supplement their income and derive some independence from the first real teaching jobs, a point which had an impact on how we perceive them today as we will see below. And yet, amidst this relative comfortable financial position one can see retrospectively (re)emerging, in photography, the romantic figure of the artist. Frank's, Winogrand's, Arbus' and Friedlander's commitement to their œuvre may not have been as extreme—or as pathological—as W. Eugene Smith's, but it was a life commitment that in many respects overcame all other life commitments.[8]

8 The extreme sensitivity of this issue may be seen in an almost tragic failure of their photography, not so much in the long term (as this exhibition and others quite clearly elicit) but in their own eyes. Frank stopped taking pictures in 1960 (the story goes that he lost his Leica and never bought another one), Arbus committed suicide (granted, suicide is a mystery if one looks at it individually, but there seems to be a pattern here), Winogrand's images became compulsively repetitive (as wonderfully elicited in the last section of the exhibition), and Friedlander, who remained alive and kept doing photography, completely changed styles and topics, almost starting a second career.[9]

An open, even indeterminate work to be looked at comprehensively

9 One of the other important qualities of the present exhibition is to show that Winogrand's images—at least the great majority of them—debunk the two dominant tenets of photography at the time, ie the perfect single image (Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment "for instance) and the narrative "syntagmatic series", ie the photo essay (in magazines but also in photo books such as those by Walker Evans or Robert Frank)[10].

10 This is clearly evidenced in Winogrand's growing issues with editing and even printing his images, as well as in the photo books he made during his life which were essentially

thematic and somewhat less accomplished than his photography, or at least much incomplete.[11] Some of his images are intriguing in themselves and display amazing formal qualities that allow them to stand alone. But such piecemeal "reading" of—or simply confrontation with—his images may be quite puzzling, and do not do full justice to his photography.

11 Many viewers who do not have any prior knowledge of his œuvre nor any particular training in photo history are puzzled after touring the exhibition (strangely this puzzlement seems to be less obvious when seeing the images in a book, a lead/hypothesis that would need to be explored). A brief series of conversations I had with such viewers led me to believe that this was the double result of two features of the exhibition: first it does not hide the photographer's failures and thus eschews all form of hagiography and hindsight clairvoyance so common in retrospectives; and second it avoids impressing upon the œuvre an overarching (and ex-post-facto order) thus keeping it its fuzzy, indeterminate nature. This is often something that contemporary viewers, who have grown accustomed to didactic exhibitions may find unsettling with the present one.

12 Photography—and maybe art in general for that matter—does two things: it makes us see *something else*, and it makes us see familiar things *differently*. The two poles are not separable except for the purpose of analysis, and they interact with each other in the actual viewing experience. Photography is especially tricky in that it never quite sheds its relationship with reality, even when it tries hard to do so (and Winogrand's does not). Thus, one can always read "society," "the times," the *zeitgeist* in any image or body of images.[12] Even when one tries to soften the concept of society/reality—as is done by the author of one of the essays in the catalogue and the curator of the exhibition himself—such an approach remains a way of looking *through* photographs—at a reality beyond the images which act as "windows"—more than *at* photographs.[13] John Szarkowski, who had a great sense for where photography was going, concocted an exhibition in 1967 with pictures by Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus, and called it "New Documents," associating in a major curatorial gesture three photographers, one of whom —Arbus—seemed to have little to do with the other two. His 1967 "gesture" remains a defining one to this day. Yet the question remains as to the meaning of "documents". Documents of what? Of American society? Or of what it is to photograph when you are a photographer to paraphrase Winogrand's most famous aphorism?[14] This is an issue which lies at the heart of photography's complex relationship with the world and its representation. Winogrand's photographs are—of course—of a time and a place but I would argue that they say precious little on this time and that place. Or rather they make so much more sense when looked at for what they *are* then for what they *say*. In a way, Garry Winogrand's photography is like a practical course in applied Marshall McLuhan : "the medium IS the message."[15]

Experimenting, again and again

13 If one accepts to take his images for what they are, that is to say images, one sees Winogrand as an experimentator of the medium, a risk taker, somewhat of a daredevil of the camera. Winogrand's experimentation is not of the abstract or of the manipulative kind. His is more of a mechanical kind, and I'm sure that he would have loved the possibilities offered by digital photography, not as post-production (for which he seemed

to have very little interest) but as shooting technique allowing us to make pictures all the time but hardly ever look at them.

14 If one takes this approach, then the whole debate which flared up around the photograph of the mixed-race couple and the monkeys in Central Park is utterly pointless and irrelevant.[16] Winogrand made this image, if I read Tod Papageorge's account of the scene well, because he instinctly, almost physically spotted a perfect ensemble (this is how I understand him shoving his good friend Papageorge aside to make the picture from a specific place, which he had visualized). He was surprised of the reaction to this image for an obvious reason. The "content" or symbolism, or connotation, etc. of the image were of no interest to him. Did he even see them? The question is specious if we stop looking at this image as a *single* image and as "delivering a message."

15 At the same time, it would be just as absurd and probably even dangerous to abstract the form from its content as it may lead to a sort of formal irresponsibility. This is why I suggest to see Winogrand's photographs more as a form of anti-mastery, of constant attempt at refusing, avoiding and sometimes even destroying anything vaguely resembling success according to the canons of "good photography." As Tod Papageorge, who was one of Winogrand's early *protégés*, notes in this issue, Winogrand never wanted to make again a picture he felt he had already made. The exhibition and the historical work done by the contributors to the catalogue show that Winogrand was perpetually unsatisfied with his own work. He seemed to have refused any image that satisfied him, for the "good image" puts the viewer to sleep just as a good meal puts the guest to sleep.

16 Such deconstructive ardor doesn't go without contradictions, pains, ambiguities and misunderstandings. Even for Winogrand going against the grain of Western art was a difficult process.[17] Because paradoxically—I'm making this hypothesis as a means of overcoming the puzzlement created by his images—Winogrand may have been trying to make us (and himself first) focus on what I will call for want of a better word the *thickness* of reality, and to some extent its unreadability. I would argue that he didn't make images to make us read them, but perhaps to show the impossibility to do so. This is at least what I understand when I read that Winogrand didn't like the narrativity of images.[18] For the "rhetorical" narrative (super-imposed on the "chaos of life") was a little too reminiscent of what Daniel Boorstin called in 1961 the "pseudo event," a sort of play written with a view to its being picked up by the media.[19] The triumph of the pseudo-event characterizes his Los Angeles pictures, not so much because Los Angeles—the real Los Angeles—is the capital of the movie making industry, but because the place has turned into into a pseudo event itself (and not only generates them).[20]

17 Conversely, he reveled in aphorisms. The emergence of photographers' aphorisms in the 1960 is directly connected with the development of their teaching activity. But in the case of Winogrand, who had an incredible acting talent—if we are to believe those who knew him and by looking at the video displayed in the exhibition of him answering students' questions,—aphorisms are particularly cryptic and should be taken with a pinch of salt. I see them more as a smoke screen, a way of hiding, than necessarily a definite truth about —even self assessment on—his own work, may be a way of consciously misleading his audience.[21]

Time and the body

18 The same mistrust for anything symbolic is to be found in Robert Frank's work. Except that Frank stressed his own subjectivity through narration (his is a very narrative form of photography, so much so that he quit taking pictures to make movies), something that Walker Evans recognized and liked in Frank. Conversely Evans did not understand Winogrand probably for the very same reason, although Winogrand admired Evans whom he may have seen less as an example to follow—theirs were completely opposite styles—as someone who made photography really photographic.[22]

19 If one goes back to a little thinking in terms of generation, one sees that the younger photographer of the group, Lee Friedlander (six years younger than Winogrand), capitalized on Frank in a different way by stressing a true aesthetic meditation on the world and not simply a projection of subjectivity onto it.

20 Thus Winogrand appears as a transitional figure in an evolutive (non linear) process towards a (contemporary) practice of photography in which the body is a major component. I would thus argue that the photographying body, the viewing body—for one sees with one's body—is one of the major subjects in Winogrand's images, both in the display of his own viewing body and in his obsession for the representation of bodies.[23] And Winogrand puts them brutally in the foreground, always testing the right distance, a most difficult and hazardous operation. The lesson will be picked up by the next generation, Stephen Shore and Joel Meyerowitz in the first part of their careers on the one hand, and on the other, Nan Goldin or Cindy Sherman who would make it the narcissistic center of their œuvre.

21 As his idea of what he wanted to do matured, towards the end of the 1950s, he defined a very simple and adaptable setup: a wide-angle lens encompassing a broad scene and forcing the photographer to get "closer," a fast film accepting large differences in contrast and lighting making exposure easier before automatic cameras and TTL light measurement, and practising frame tilts to find the radial point. Armed with such setup he launches in something which could be called "analytical sampling" or rather "cut outs" as opposed to synthetic ones (eg. Cartier-Bresson or portraitists). His images never summarize or subsume anything and refuse the viewer any access to the "essence" of the moment. They "merely" explore the space between the bodies, and between the bodies and the photographer. For those are *bodies* before they are people (was he interested in people's history as documentarians are? I doubt it very much), and before they even become "subjects." Winogrand's photographs exist in a precarious balance within that distance between bodies that American space allows, and thus what kind of gaze one can train on people and things.[24]

22 I would thus argue that he is a photographer of (what constitutes) the public space in America (as opposed to photographers of the private space) more than a "street photographer." Looking at it thus, one may also revisit the controversy surrounding the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans* in 1958-1959: what if the criticism that the book met when published in the US had less to do with a negative attitude Frank may have had towards "the American way of life" and more with the fact that as a European, Frank did not quite get the intersticial space in interpersonal relations in American society.

23 On the other hand, Winogrand's pictures explore—from an American perspective this time—this "proximity" and that may be what makes them rich, mysterious and somewhat opaque. Would that be a way of making sense of one more aphorism that Winogrand told Leo Rubinfien one day of 1981 on a shooting trip in the streets of New York streets: "Really, I'm a student of America."[25] Could it mean not so much an *observer* as an *observant* , one who does not study American but one who learns from it, with a camera?

NOTES

1. See also the exhibition catalogue: Leo Rubinfien, ed., *Garry Winogrand*, New Haven, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in Association with Yale University Press, 2013.

2. The Musée du Jeu-de-Paume has exhibited the four photographers over the years : Lee Friedlander (September 19-December 31, 2006), Robert Frank (January 20-March 22, 2009), Diane Arbus (October 18, 2011-February 5, 2012), and Garry Winogrand (October 14, 2014-February 8, 2015).

3. See my "American Photography in France since World War II: Was France Liberated by the United States?" [https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00382235/fr/] in David Nye et Mick Gidley, eds., *American Photographs in Europe*, Amsterdam, Vu University Press, 1994, 205-22.

4. "A wart-covered picture of America," "A Degradation of a Nation," were some of the comments on what the book was purported to show. As to the images themselves, although their impact on photographers like Evans, or Winogrand was very positive, others in the photographic criticism community found them "flawed by meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposure, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness." See Sarah Greenough, "Blowing Down Bleecker Street: Destroying *The Americans*," in Sarah Greenough, *Looking in: Robert Frank's* The Americans, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 2009, 315.

5. The history of these photographers is well covered in the following monographs: Robert Frank, *Diane Arbus : Revelations* (New York: Random House, 2003); Peter Galassi, *Friedlander* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005); Sarah Greenough, *Looking in : Robert Frank's* The Americans (Washington: National Gallery of Art; Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).

6. As Robert Frank put it: "Above all, I know that life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference. " ("A Statement," *US Camera Annual 1958*, 115.)

7. The art market (galleries, collectors, prints) had not reached photography yet. One may see this generation as the last one before the art market became a player in the field.

8. On W. Eugene Smith relationship with his subjects and assignments, see Russell Miller, *Magnum : Fifty years at the front line of history* (New York : Grove Press, c1997), especially pp.153-57.

9. Friedlander was always more of a landscape photographer than Winogrand. After his "street photography period (1960's)," he did move into urban landscapes in the 1970s, with *The American Monument*, and into (often urban) vegetation, a theme he pursued until the present in American, Europe and Asia. He also continued his work as a portraitist.

10. Walker Evans, *American Photographs* (1938); Robert Frank, *The Americans* (1958/1959).

11. Leo Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," in Leo Rubinfien, ed., *Garry Winogrand*, 45-47.

12. I, for one, did it in a comparative study of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus for my 1979 MA Thesis (*The Other Side of Paradise. The Worlds of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus* http://perso.univ-lyon2.fr/~jkempf/Arbus_Frank.pdf) in a sociological and historical perspective, taking both

photographers as "reflecting" their times. Although such reading is always possible, I now believe that it only tells part of the story (in fact that of the *reception* of the work) and harldy touches, in most cases, its *production*.

13. See John Szarkowski's duality in *Mirrors and Windows : American Photography since 1960*, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1978.

14. "I photograph to know what a thing will look like photographed." Several versions exist of this aphorism, with minor variations. I was not able to trace with certainty the origin of it. The closest reference to it is in Barbara Diamonstein, *Visions and Images, American Photographers on Photography* (Rizzoli: New York, 1982) where Diamonstein refers to Winogrand's answer to a student's question "five or six years ago" which puts it ca. 1977.

15. This is what I meant when I wrote about Winogrand's photography as as being a sort of pure photographic gaze. See my http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org/2014/08/jean-kempf-quest-ce-quun-regard-photographique-garry-winogrand-au-fil-du-rasoir/.

16. See Tod Papageorge's contribution in the dossier and Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," 36-37.

17. Even the readymade remained an act of mastery, actually perhaps an even stronger one as the material completely disappeard before the pure gesture of the artist. And so was super-realism which exhibited the skill of the painter under the guise of a submission to "reality."

18. Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," pp.22-23.

19. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image : A guide to pseudo-events in America*, New York, Harper & Row, 1961 and Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," 38-39 on his experience in photographying politics.

20. His 1968 application to a second Guggenheim Fellowship was based on an investigation of the "manufactured news event." See Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," 24.

21. I also have serious reservations about an over interpretations of Winogrand's application for a Guggenheim fellowship on October 15, 1963. The text of the application is made public for the first time with this exhibition. It's a wonderful piece of writing, the only one we have by him on his own work (see Rubinfien, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," 29-30). It's uniqueness should warn us about what we may actually draw from it. I believe that the very elegiac, and slightly grandiloquent style (especially the phrase "we have not loved life"), may say more about his state of personal depression caused both by serious trouble in his life and the fear brought up by international tensions than about his photography. Also the fact that it was this was his second application to the prestigious award and that he had badly taken his first rejection (most probably due to the absence of support from Walker Evans), may have prompted him to cleverly formulate the application in a style that could please both Evans and the Guggenheim committee by mixing despair, and hope in the redeeming value of a transcendent American spirit.

22. Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," 53.

23. Such open obsession in street photography would be impossible today, especially in France, for legal reasons having to do with growing restrictions on the definition of what constitutes public space and fair representation.

24. This study of this "right" distance reminds me of what Edward T. Hall called *proxemics* in his 1966 book, *The Hidden Dimension*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966.

25. Rubinfein, "Garry Winogrand's Republic," p.37 and n.92.

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